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COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY WITH STAKEHOLDERS: A GUIDE FOR ENERGY REGULATORS IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

November 2021

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COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY WITH STAKEHOLDERS: A GUIDE FOR ENERGY REGULATORS IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

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List of Acronyms or Abbreviations

ATTN – Attention

BCC – Blind Carbon Copy

BIH – Bosnia and Herzegovina

EEC – Energy and Environment Cabinet

FERK – Regulatory Commission for Energy in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina

NARUC – National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners

P&Ps – Policies and Procedures

PIO – Public Information Officer

PSC – Public Service Commission

RERS – Regulatory Commission for Energy of Republika Srpska

SERC – State Electricity Regulatory Commission

STTA – Short-term Technical Assistance

USAID – United States Agency for International Development

1 Introduction

In its engagement with energy and utility regulators across the globe, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has emphasized the importance of effective communication with stakeholders, particularly ratepayers, in building public confidence in regulatory bodies. The National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners (NARUC) has participated in these efforts by providing technical assistance through training and the creation of primers and other documents that provide guidance on best practices in regulatory communications.

Since 2014, USAID and NARUC have provided technical assistance specific to the needs of the three energy regulators in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BIH): the State Electricity Regulatory Commission (SERC), the Regulatory Commission for Energy in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FERK) and the Regulatory Commission for Energy of Republika Srpska (RERS). In recent years, that work has focused on public outreach. It was the subject of a workshop conducted in Mostar in November 2018, which focused on media training and developing communications strategies. A September 2019 study tour brought representatives from the three BIH regulatory agencies to the state utility regulatory commissions in Ohio and Kentucky. Topics covered included public participation in regulatory proceedings, outreach to consumers, and retail customer dispute resolution. Staff from the three regulatory commissions can contact NARUC to receive copies of past training documents.

In addition to training, NARUC, with funding from USAID, has prepared several resource documents to assist regulators in BIH in developing effective public communication and engagement programs. A Communications and Customer Education Best Practices and Guidelines document was completed in March 2017. In October 2019, following the study tour, NARUC staff produced a guide *(Communications Strategy Development Guide: Promoting Public Education and Engagement in Energy Regulation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, NARUC, October 2019)* to assist the BIH regulatory agencies in developing strategic communications plans.

In the Spring of 2021, NARUC organized a series of trainings to support the BIH regulators in refining aspects of their own communication plans and public engagement efforts, focusing on five key topics: implementing communications plans, speechmaking, using social media, preparing for media interviews, and preparing human interest stories. The first session of each topic included presentations on best practices by commissions in the United States and other countries as well as a discussion of the challenges in BIH. The second sessions a few weeks later included presentations by BIH participants on various exercises they completed between the two sessions and a further discussion of the topic, including desired content in guidance documents. For future internal training purposes, recordings of the workshop sessions, the training exercises and extensive supporting documentation can be accessed here.

This document compiles the best practices presented during the workshops and the additional information requested by the BIH participants. It is intended as a resource that can be used by all employees of the BIH regulatory agencies.

Finally, another useful reference to accompany this guide is: *Promoting Transparency and Public Participation in Energy Regulation: A Communications Primer for Utility Regulators*. This document, NARUC published under USAID funding in September 2019, describes the importance of public engagement in establishing and supporting the core capacities necessary for effective regulation.

2 Implementing Strategic Communications Plans

Developing a strategic communication plan is a key step in a regulatory agency's establishing a robust and effective program of public engagement. However, a strategic communication plan is meaningless unless its goals and objectives are met through implementation of its component elements. The key to effective implementation is the presence within an agency of established mechanisms for carrying out key communication functions and the means and will to do so on an ongoing basis. An established best practice is to develop written policies and procedures (P&Ps) that may be used by all agency employees in carrying out communication functions.

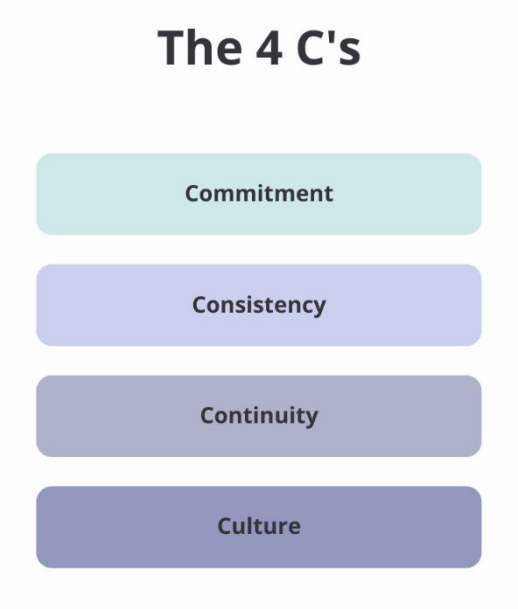

Figure 1: The 4 C's

The conceptual framework of this best practice is what can be viewed as the "4 Cs": Commitment, Consistency, Continuity and Culture. The presence of written P&Ps demonstrates a **Commitment** to enshrining best practices that provide transparency and produce public engagement; adherence to written P&Ps ensures **Consistency** in implementation; the presence of written P&Ps in agency operational manuals and training and transition documents provides **Continuity** as employees and agency leadership changes; that Commitment, Consistency and Continuity in turn combine to create a **Culture** of transparency, accessibility, and accountability that create public confidence in the regulatory agency.

SERC, FERK, and RERS all have developed strategic communications plans based upon the guide completed in October 2019[1] under the cooperative agreement between USAID and NARUC. As of August 2021, the three strategic communications plans remain in draft form pending final approval by their respective commissions. Although the expectation is that the strategic communication plans will be approved in the near future, this portion of the training focused on establishing consistent P&Ps that could be put into place with or without a final strategic communications plan.

The best practice of developing written P&Ps was discussed in presentations by the consultant and expert volunteers and reinforced through the interactive exercise. Workshop participants agreed on the importance of formalized policies and procedures to insure consistency and continuity. Participants stated that written rules would be helpful in the implementation of strategic communication plans. This template provides a guide to creating P&P documents and suggests which communication functions should be memorialized.

2.1 How to Use and What to Include in a Policies and Procedures Document

P&P documents should be maintained in a way that makes them accessible to all agency employees. This can be through agency operations manuals that are provided to employees in a hard copy or electronic format or in a shared online library. The employees primarily responsible for each function and for revising a P&P document should, of course, retain personal copies.

The use of P&P documents should be included in training for new employees and included in briefing books provided to new commissioners. A P&P document should contain information in sufficient detail to enable an employee tasked with carrying out a specific communication function by following the steps in the document, with minimal outside guidance beyond that specified in the instructions. This should allow key communication tasks to be accomplished in the absence of the employee or employees primarily responsible for carrying out a specific function.

[1] "Communications Strategy Development Guide: Promoting Public Education and Engagement in Energy Regulation in Bosnia and Herzegovina." NARUC. http://pubs.naruc.org/pub/F579078A-1866-DAAC-99FB-2877B75A9718

P&P documents should be formatted consistently for all functions. The document may include a header that clearly identifies the communication function, date of initial adoption, and other key facts. The format should make it easy to make and memorialize revisions.

Several sample P&P documents, in slightly different formats, are provided as annexes at the end of this guide. They are based upon P&P documents produced by the BIH participants as an exercise in the course of this training, with some changes made to reflect best practices as discussed during the workshop. For example:

- Routine media inquiries and requests for interviews, which were addressed in a single document, should be the subject of separate P&Ps. This is to ensure that routine requests are handled expeditiously and do not become enmeshed in the more complex process of addressing interview requests and preparing for interviews.

- The P&P for addressing interview requests is amended to include the designated Commission spokesperson in the response to interview requests and planning for interviews. This reflects the best practice of having the spokesperson included in all Commission communication processes and decisions.

These template documents can be further modified to reflect the organizational structures and to suit the needs of SERC, FERK, and RERS. They can be used as the basis for P&Ps for other key commission functions.

Each P&P document should contain the following information:

1. **Process owner** – The position of the person responsible for creating, updating, and implementing or directly supervising the process described in the document

2. **Process implementer** – If the person who creates and updates the document is not the same as the person primarily responsible for carrying out the tasks in the document, that should be indicated in the document. For example, if the process owner is the Communications Director, but the process is carried out by the Press Officer, that should be specified in the document.

3. **Scope** – What specific processes are covered by the document. List exceptions. For example, if all calls from the news media are to be channeled through the Press Officer, except for those to the commission chairman, that exception should be specified.

4. **Definitions** – Define all key terms in the document. Draw necessary distinctions, such as those between a news release and a media advisory, or between different types of public meetings. Err on the side of defining too many terms; it will reduce ambiguity later.

5. **List of relevant documents** – List any documents that are created by the process or necessary for the process to be implemented. These can include internal permission or review forms, spending authorizations, etc. that must be filled out by the process implementer.

6. **Process description** – This is a step-by-step description of the process itself. It should contain enough detail that someone with no prior knowledge of the process could implement it by following the description. The description should be formatted in a manner that allows for future revisions without causing wholesale renumbering or reformatting of the document. The most effective way to accomplish this is by describing the process in an outline format that identifies general aspects of the process and each major step and its sub-steps. Revisions due to changes in policies and procedures or technology thus affect only a narrow portion of the process.

7. **Revision history** – Every change made to the document since its original adoption should be memorialized. The information should include the date of the change, the portion of the document affected and the nature of and reason for the change. Maintaining a revision history is essential to

maintaining the integrity of the process by demonstrating ongoing oversight. It also provides the institutional knowledge that is needed to answer the inevitable questions that arise about agency processes, particularly during transitions.

8. **Approvals** – The standard P&P format should include space to record each step of approval of the document, specifying the date, the job title of the approver, and a signature – either written or electronic, or both, depending on how the documents are maintained.

9. **Relevant documents listed in the P&P should be appended to the document** – Revisions made to those documents should be memorialized in the P&P, such as changes to a standard press release format or language.

2.2 Suggested List of Communications Functions Requiring Documentation

The implementation of all key communication functions should be maintained in writing as standardized P&P documents. These should include all routine functions carried out on a frequent basis (response to media calls or news releases), those functions that are routine but less frequent (public comment meeting, legislative testimony), and those that are both infrequent and not routine, but that for which effective communication is critical (disaster response and other crisis communications). Written procedures will enable these functions to be carried out in a uniform and effective manner under a variety of circumstances.

The most common communication functions are listed below. Agencies should consider what additional functions should have P&P documents, and which, if any, may be omitted.

1. **News releases/news advisories** – Drafting, review, and distribution

2. **Agency publications** – If the communication office's functions include producing newsletters, brochures or other documents distributed to the public, a P&P should outline the process for creating, reviewing, and issuing those documents.

3. **Responding to media inquiries** – Process for receiving and responding to questions from the news media when an immediate response is requested. This should include whether and how responses are vetted, whether responses are oral or written, timelines for responses, etc.

4. **Responding to requests for media interviews** – The process for addressing requests for interviews with agency personnel other than, or in addition to, the designated spokesperson. Include the process for deciding whether to grant a request, determining who the interviewee should be, interview preparation, etc.

5. **Press conferences/media briefings** – Planning and conduct of these events

6. **Crisis communications** – Define the process for agency public communications in crises such as natural disasters, electric grid failures, major accidents, etc. Identify the principal spokesperson and who will serve in case they are unavailable, describe the amount of leeway they have in deciding what information to provide on behalf of the agency, and identify the chain of command in emergencies, including location of contact information for key personnel.

7. **Requests for public documents** – Depending on legal requirements, this may require separate processes for requests from the news media and from non-media requesters. It also may require coordination with agency legal staff.

8. **Conducting public meetings** – In general, a P&P document is required for meetings that the agency conducts on its own initiative, rather than those held because of a legal requirement. In the latter case, the conduct of the meeting falls within the purview of the legal staff, which is responsible for adherence

to the statutes and regulations governing the meeting. Unless there are types of meetings that differ significantly enough to require separate procedures, a P&P usually can be written in a way to address all contingencies.

9. **Website** – Necessary either if the communication office is responsible for the overall management of the website or if it produces website content that is not covered by a separate P&P document, e.g., news releases.

10. **Management of social media accounts** – If this is a communication office function, describe how the account will be used, the process for posting content, vetting information to be placed on the account, responding to comments (if comments are allowed), and dealing with misinformation, abusive comments, or violation of standards.

11. **Requests for agency speakers** – The process for responding to requests for agency personnel to make speeches or presentations to outside groups, including stakeholders. Include criteria for determining whether the request should be granted, or the subject matter limited, due to pending matters before the agency.

12. **Preparation of legislative testimony** – If the agency is summoned to appear before a legislative body, outline the process for determining who will speak on behalf of the agency, who will prepare the material to be presented, and how the material will be reviewed prior to presentation.

2.3 Maintaining Institutional Knowledge

As stated above, P&P documents support consistency and continuity in the implementation of core communication functions. This makes them a key source of institutional knowledge – the information that allows a regulatory agency to function well. If institutional knowledge is respected and maintained, the most efficient and effective practices are preserved and endure, obviating the need to "reinvent the wheel" as staff and commissioners come and go over time.

Each agency should have a central repository for all P&P documents. A designated staff member(s) should be responsible for maintaining this repository – whether in hard copy or electronic format, or both – and for ensuring that all P&Ps are kept up to date as revision are made to them. Assuming that agency functions beyond communications (e.g., tariff review, consumer service, legal, etc.) will be memorialized in P&Ps, a centralized repository is best housed within an administrative function (for example, agency administration, office of the executive director, information technology) that will aggregate information from all operational branches.

An electronic library is most effective way of maintaining P&P documents and making the accessible to all staff. However, it is important that the library be maintained in duplicate – an open version to be used by agency staff and a closed version accessed only by staff responsible for maintaining the archive (a backup hard copy version also may be kept.) This preserves a master version of each P&P document that cannot be inadvertently or intentionally altered.

As each operational branch creates and revises its P&P documents, staff within that branch should transmit the documents to the central repository and verify that they have been received and archived. Assuming that P&Ps are placed into an electronic library, verification can easily be accomplished by examining the version of the document in the public library to ensure that it mirrors the version provided by the operational branch.

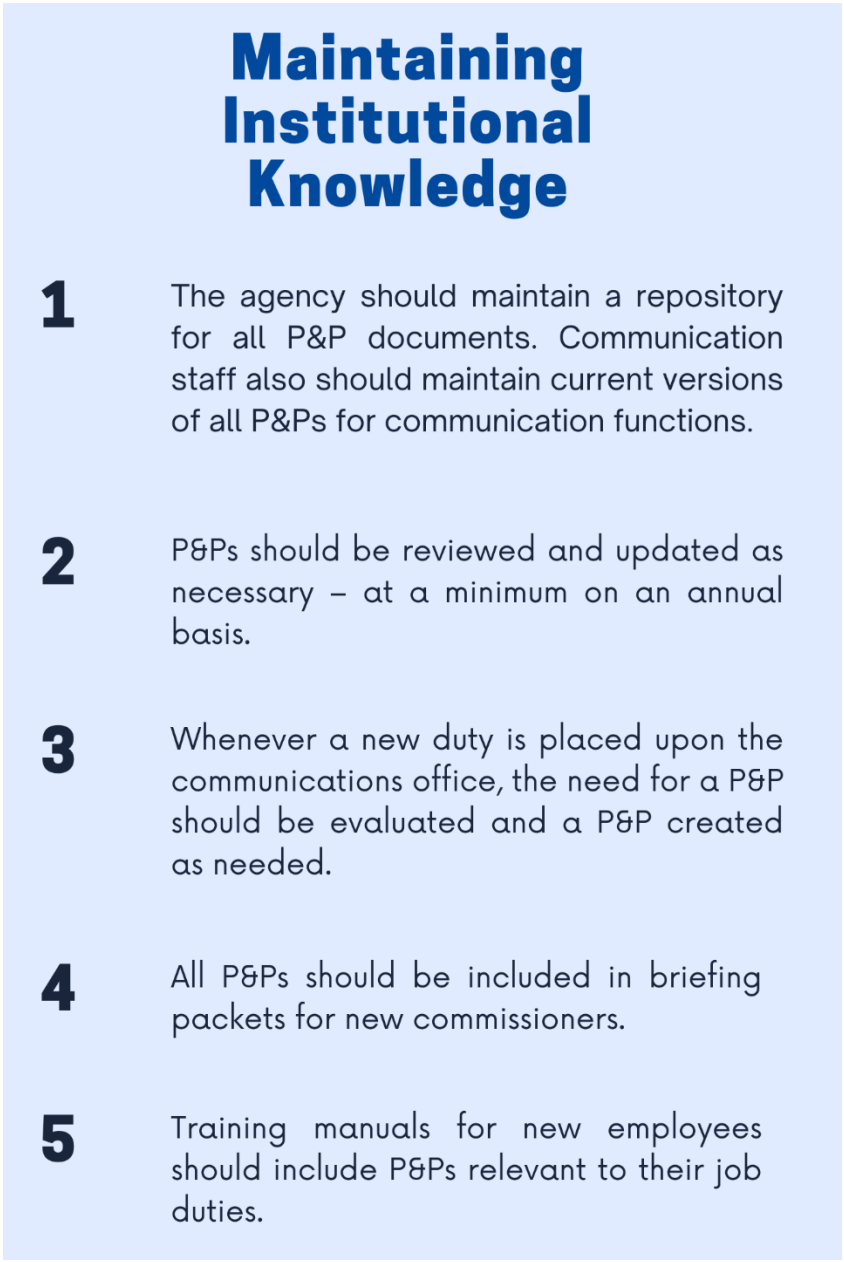

Figure 2: Maintaining Institutional Knowledge

3 Speechmaking

Speechmaking encompasses a variety of communication functions. Some are obligatory, including presentations at public comment meetings or testimony before parliamentary committees. Others are discretionary, such as invitations to speak to civic groups, academic gatherings, or meetings of commercial organizations. Notably, speechmaking does not include media communication functions such as responding to inquiries, participating in interviews, or delivering media briefings.

Whereas media communications typically are the responsibility solely of those agency staff designated as spokespersons, a broader range of agency personnel may be called upon to deliver speeches. These may include commissioners, senior staff such as executive directors or department heads, technical staff or, in many cases, the same agency spokespeople who deal with the news media.

A person's willingness to deliver a speech must also be considered. People who lack confidence in their ability to speak in public and who are resistant to doing so generally are not going to be the most effective messengers on the agency's behalf. Decisions on who delivers a speech may be made on a case-by-case basis and may be determined by who issued the summons or invitation, whether a specific person has been asked to appear and who is available on a given date. In some cases, such as public meeting presentations, delivery of the speech may fall by default to a specific employee by virtue of their regular duties.

In every instance, it is vitally important that the content of the speech or presentation be consistent with the agency's overall communication goals and messaging. This is true both when the person giving the speech is preparing the content and when the speech is being prepared for the person who will be delivering it. Agency principals (commissioners, senior executive staff) may prepare their own speeches or may prefer to have someone write speeches on their behalf. In the latter case, it is important to have a draft ready well in advance of the date the speech will be delivered. This will allow the principal time to make such revisions as are needed, particularly to provide consistency with the principal's speaking style, and to rehearse the speech.

Regardless of who prepares the speech, and as noted in more detail below, the agency should have a process (ideally, in the form of a P&P document) in place for vetting the contents of the speech or presentation both for technical accuracy and for consistency of messaging. Treat a speech as you would a news release – it should not go out without review by someone other than the author. While an individual's degree of comfort with delivering a public speech depends on a variety of factors – command of the subject matter, size of the audience, setting, etc. – the single greatest determinant of speaker confidence is experience. In this workshop, the participants who were least apprehensive about public speaking were those who do it on a regular basis.

That level of confidence cannot be established over four hours in a virtual workshop. With that in mind, the following are ways to develop and practice public speaking skills in an environment that is less judgmental and stressful than the public arena:

1. Take a public speaking class at a local educational institution.

2. Join a local branch of Toastmasters International. There are two branches in Sarajevo. Toastmasters also has a fairly easy process for beginning a new club. More information can be found at: https://www.toastmasters.org/start-a-club

3. Join a civic group such as Rotary International that offers its members opportunities to practice public speaking in a friendly setting. Rotary has clubs in Sarajevo, Mostar, and Banja Luka.

4. There are a variety of online courses available for people who want to improve their speaking skills. A list is here: https://www.inc.com/larry-kim/nine-places-to-learn-public-speaking-for-free.html

5. Organize a public speaking club with co-workers or friends. Meet regularly to practice prepared speeches, conduct impromptu speech exercises, and discuss ways to better deliver agency messages to the public.

There is no substitute for practicing public speaking as a way of improving skills and building confidence. However, anxiety about a speaking appearance can be eased by thorough preparation. This includes writing and practicing the speech itself. But it also includes careful attention to the logistics, mechanics, and parameters of the speaking appearance. The following checklist is intended to ensure that those important logistical and mechanical aspects are not overlooked, whether the speaking appearance is one initiated by the agency or a request from an outside party.

3.1 Checklist for Public Speeches or Presentations

3.1.1 Logistics

1. **Reason for the speech** – If it is a request from an outside party, your first decision is whether to accept. If it is initiated by your agency – a public information meeting, for example – you will have more control over logistics and more decisions to make.

2. **The speaker** – How is the speaker selected? Was a specific person requested? For agency-initiated meetings, is it someone's job responsibility?

3. **Audience size** – How many people will be in attendance? Is the audience size predictable?

4. **Venue** – If you have control over the venue, make sure it will accommodate the largest crowd you expect with room to spare. Better to speak to a small crowd in a large room than to deal with people packed into an overcrowded space or one that leaves people outside. If you are certain of the crowd size (invitation-only meetings, for example) select a venue that matches the type of meeting. An auditorium or theatre may be best for formal speeches, while a conference room may work better for a small, informal presentation. If you are speaking by invitation, find out as much as you can about the venue. This includes room size and layout.

5. **Technology** – If you are planning to use presentation software, know whether the venue will provide the necessary hardware (projector, laptop, etc.) or whether you will need to bring your own. Does the room have microphones and speakers? Will you be confined to a stationary microphone, or will you have a wireless mike that allows you to move around the room? Will there be a podium or rostrum for your notes?

6. **Date and time** – If you control these, schedule the event to make it as convenient as possible for your intended audience. Public comment meetings are best scheduled after the end of normal working hours. Be mindful of factors that can make it difficult for people to get to the meeting on time, such as traffic issues or other events nearby at the same time. Similarly, do not schedule events when they conflict with other major events of public interest.

7. **Security** – If the subject matter or the event itself is controversial, decide whether security is needed. Determine who will provide the security and make arrangements well in advance.

8. **Advance work** – If you have never been in the venue, visit it ahead of the event if possible. Confirm availability of technology, layout of the room and other factors that may affect the event.
    a. Prepare a checklist before the day of the speech with everything you need to take with you. Go through it before you leave for the event.

9. **On the day of** – Plan to arrive well in advance of the scheduled time. There is nothing worse than getting stuck in traffic and then running into the room and straight to the podium without a

chance to assess the audience and prepare yourself to speak. If your agency has organized the event, arrive early enough to give yourself enough time to deal with unexpected issues such as access to the venue or technology problems.

3.1.2 The Speech Parameters

1. **Format** – Is it a solo speech or a panel? How much time will you have? Are slides expected/allowed? Will there be questions?

2. **Purpose** – Education/information. Promotion. Public engagement. Stakeholder outreach. Testimony.

3. **Audience** – What are the demographics of the audience? What is the level of knowledge and expertise? Are friendly or hostile? Do they have specific expectations?

4. **Media presence** – Will there be news media present? Will they have an opportunity to ask questions of the speaker?

3.1.3 Preparing the Speaker and the Speech

1. **Content** – Who determines the content and writes the speech? The speaker alone or are others involved? Is the speech reviewed? By whom? If the speaker is a principal (commissioner or senior executive staff), how much staff support do they require?

2. **Staff work** – Bring in staff as needed to provide technical information for the speech itself and assist in preparation for questions or discussion.

3. **The words** – Match the words to the occasion and the speaker. Testimony before legislators, in which precise wording is often critical, may require a fully written text even for the most confident and experienced speaker. For formal speeches, such as keynote addresses, some speakers may want a full text, while others may want only talking points, which are key points in full sentences. Generally, with less formal speeches and more experienced speakers, talking points or even bullet points – brief key phrases or facts – may be adequate. Preparation for a panel discussion may require both a full text for time-limited opening remarks and talking or bullet points for the discussion.

4. **Questions** – If the event includes a question-and-answer session or if there is a possibility of media questions afterward, prepare talking points or bullets for anticipated questions.

5. **Slide presentations** – If the speaking event includes a slide presentation, observe the following best practices:

Figure 3: Slide presentation best practices

6. Speeches that use full text should be rehearsed and annotated as necessary with information such as pronunciation of names, technical terms, or words not in the speakers' first language.

7. If the speaker is a principal and will not be accompanied by staff, staff should conduct advance work if possible and brief the speaker on the venue, the audience, directions to the venue, etc.

4 Using and Responding to Social Media

Although SERC, FERK, and RERS requested that the use of social media be a topic of this training, all three indicated they are not currently using social media and have no immediate plans to do so. Only FERK indicated any interest in establishing a presence on social media in the foreseeable future. It is worth noting that other energy regulators in the immediate region are not active on social media.

With that in mind, the workshop shifted from a focus on best practices in establishing a comprehensive social media program to a discussion of undertaking a more focused effort that would help build professional relationships and direct traffic to the agency websites. This brief template expands on the information conveyed in the workshop about the strengths, weaknesses, and potential effectiveness of various social media platforms.

4.1 Initial Considerations

1. **Audience** – Who do you want to reach: professional colleagues, news media, stakeholders, certain ratepayers, general public?

2. **Goals** – Do you want to engage with your audience, or do you just want to push information?

3. **Key messages** – Self-contained message versus short content designed to drive traffic to website

4. **Legal requirements** – Are there legal requirements that govern whether you can disable comments or limit access?

5. **Resources** – What personnel and how much time can you devote to managing social media accounts?

4.2 Potential Social Media Platforms

LinkedIn

1. Audience is made up largely of professionals

2. Ability to select/limit network – only engage with people you choose

3. Low maintenance – few comments, mostly exchanges of professional information

4. Easy to establish contacts with regulatory peers, stay abreast of developments in your field

5. Good venue for posting job openings

BOTTOM LINE: Requires modest commitment of staff resources, establishes professional presence, does not expose agency to online controversies or critics.

Twitter

1. Established platform, familiar to most online users

2. Very simple and easy to use

3. Character limit discourages lengthy posts – not conducive for complaints or criticisms

4. Suited for short packets of information: meeting announcements, emergency notices

5. Easy to drive traffic to website; use to announce commission actions and link to news releases, orders, and other documents on website; BitLy allows URLs to be shortened to save characters

6. Target audiences: news media, regulated entities, public officials, stakeholder groups

7. Comments easily disabled – targeted audiences are not interested in commenting

8. TweetDeck add-on allows for easy monitoring and management

BOTTOM LINE: The most suitable social media platform for communicating with the news media and driving traffic to the agency website. If comments are disabled, requires only a modest investment of time and effort.

YouTube

1. Video platform only – not suited for interactivity

2. Use to livestream commission proceeding, post informational videos, videos of past commission proceedings

3. Comments can be disabled

BOTTOM LINE: Limited applicability, but useful. If used primarily as a livestream or video archive, becomes primarily an IT function, rather than a communications function.

Facebook

1. Extremely popular platform – draws wide and diverse audience

2. No limits on length of comments – popular platform with users who are interested in being critical or stirring controversy

3. Monitoring for inappropriate content is inconsistent

4. User expectation is for engagement

5. Comments cannot readily be disabled for an entire account

6. Allows closed groups – good for specific purposes such as engagement with specific stakeholders. Easy to have online discussions.

7. Versatile – easy to post variety of content, including text, photos, videos, can be used to livestream

8. Good option for interaction with a broad audience

9. Requires most resources to manage

BOTTOM LINE: A platform that allows engagement with a diverse audience. Very large potential audience due to popularity. Best choice if you want to use social media to field customer complaints or questions. Requires consistent and ongoing monitoring and thus considerable commitment of resources. Closed groups can be useful for specific purposes.

"Entertainment" platforms – Instagram, Pinterest, Tik-Tok, etc.

These and other platforms are used primarily to post visual content – pictures, videos. They are ill suited for regulatory communications and thus are not often used for that purpose.

Examples of social media accounts of government agencies in BIH

LinkedIn	Twitter	YouTube	Facebook
Ministry of Defense	Ministry of Communications and Transport of	Parliamentary Assembly	Directorate for European Integration
Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Council of Ministers	Council of Ministers	Ministry of Security
Government of Sarajevo Canton	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Ministry of Security	Federal Ministry of Interior of FBIH
High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council	Ministry of Civil Affairs		

5 Media Interactions Overview

All three regulatory commissions in BIH have staff who regularly are experienced in dealing with news media. This workshop was focused on reviewing best practices in media relations and sharpening interview skills. This template summarizes the best practices and interview techniques presented and discussed during the workshop, as well as some additional generally applicable guidelines for dealing with the news media.

Note that sections 5.1 and 5.2 apply to interviews that are requested and scheduled well in advance, as opposed to media inquiries that are responded to when received or shortly thereafter. Responses to media inquiries on complex or controversial topics often should be deferred until an interview can be arranged and proper preparation can occur.

5.1 Before the Interview

1. Identify who will be participating on behalf of the agency. Will it be the regular media spokesperson, commission members, senior executive staff or technical experts, or some combination?

2. Do any necessary due diligence on the reporter who will be conducting the interview. What have they written about the agency in the past? Are they generally friendly or hostile? Are there any concerns about the reporters?

3. Make a list of questions you expect to be asked. Prepare answers to each question, keeping them brief. Draw on staff experts to help prepare the answers. Rehearse the answers with those who will be interviewed.

4. Identify the two or three most important points you want to make in the interview, and a similar number of subsidiary points. Practice working those points into your answers to expected questions and returning to those points from your answers.

5. If you can select the interview location, pick a venue that will be to your advantage if the interview will be on video. Do not conduct interviews sitting behind a desk – it gives the appearance of bureaucratic defensiveness. Use a conference room or setting that is less formal. If the topic is something that can be visually represented by a location – a grid control center, a renewable energy project, etc. – consider using it as a backdrop for the interview.

6. Prepare fact sheets, charts, graphs, and any other supporting materials that will provide in-depth information on the interview topic. If you can put the issue in a larger context – how are other entities in the region approaching the same issue, for example – printed materials can help do so.

Set any ground rules (you can do this in advance or before beginning the interview). Make sure the agency and the journalist have a common understanding of the terms "on the record," "off the record" and "on background." If there are certain topics that cannot be discussed for legal or other reasons, specify those in advance. If you intend to record the interview (never a bad idea) let the interviewer know in advance.

5.2 During the Interview

1. Watch your body language – even if the interview is not being recorded on video, appearing defensive can affect the tone of the story.

2. Maintain eye contact with the interviewer. It shows you are engaged. This is especially true for video interviews – looking into the camera gives a "deer in the headlights" look.

3. If you have key points to make, keep making them. No matter the question, keep returning to your most important messages.

4. Keep answers to key questions complete but compact. Stay away from irrelevant information.

5. Even if you have agreed on the meaning of "going off the record," avoid doing so. Most reporters will honor the term – some will not. Few look kindly on it.

6. If the premise of a question is incorrect, do not answer the question. Instead, correct the misinformation on which the question is based, reformulate the question (e.g., "So, what you really should be asking is…") and then answer that question.

7. Don't assume reporters have adequate background information to ask the right questions. If it's clear that they do not, take the time to provide it.

8. Don't hesitate to ask a reporter to clarify a question. Do this if the question really is confusing or unclear, or if you simply want to buy yourself some time to think about your answer.

9. Another way to buy time is to simply restate the question back to the reporter. Or just pause to settle your thoughts.

10. Don't fill silences with babbling. You may say something you didn't intend to.

11. If you don't know the answer to a question, just say so. Don't speculate or provide an answer you are unsure of. Don't get into hypothetical discussions. Simply say you don't have the answer but will get back to reporter once you do.

12. Never say "no comment." It makes it appear you are hiding something. People will always assume the worst. If you can't answer a question, explain why that is the case.

13. If the interview raises uncomfortable issues, don't try to dodge, or conceal negative information. Address it in a straightforward fashion. If there are deleterious effects on ratepayers or others, acknowledge those and express sympathy. Explain what is being done to improve the situation.

14. Don't get bogged down in overly technical or bureaucratic answers or explanations. Use language an average person can understand. Use analogies or visual images to simplify complex concepts.

15. Reporters will often end an interview by asking whether there is anything they missed. Use this as an opportunity to reiterate key points or to make points that you couldn't make earlier. Even if this question isn't asked, use your final comments to get your key messages across one last time.

5.3 General Media Advice

1. Have designated spokespeople and backups. Have a plan that always has someone available to respond to media queries.

2. All staff should be trained on the agency process for responding to media queries. The best practice is to refer all media calls, e-mails, etc. to the designated spokesperson WITHOUT EXCEPTION. This provides an opportunity to handle the inquiry expeditiously while ensuring that the answers provided are consistent with the agency position and that unauthorized disclosures are prevented. Keep in mind that reporters may try to circumvent the process by intentionally contacting other agency staff in search of information.

3. Be responsive to media queries. Make sure that your internal processes allow for very quick responses to routine questions and that responses to more complex issues do not get bogged down in internal approval processes. Reporters work on deadlines – do everything you can to provide information in a timely fashion.

4. Have designated spokespeople and backups. Have a plan that always has someone available to respond to media queries.

5. Never compromise your credibility – always respond in truthfully and in full. Establishing credibility takes a long time; it can be lost in an instant.

6. Especially in emergencies, do not speculate about things you are unsure of. It is far better to under-promise and over-deliver than to fail to deliver on overly optimistic promises.

7. If a story contains an error, respond forcefully, explaining the nature of the error and politely requesting a correction. Begin with the reporter, keeping in mind that someone else may have introduced the error; if that doesn't achieve the desired result, move up the chain of command to the editor.

8. When it comes to opinions, pick your spots. Arguing publicly over every opinion with which you disagree just makes you appear irritable and thin-skinned. When it matters enough to publicly disagree, the most effective approach is to request space to respond or to issue a general statement explaining your position.

6 Producing Human-Interest Stories

Utility regulators have a considerable influence on the lives of citizens within their areas of jurisdiction. Yet, those regulators rarely come to the attention of the public unless one of three unpopular things happens: they approve a rate increase; large numbers of customers lose their utility service; or the regulator approves a utility construction project in a controversial location.

The three energy regulatory commissions in BIH recognize that one way to improve their image and counter negative perceptions is by publicizing and humanizing the positive impacts of their work and demonstrating how it can assist ordinary citizens. For that reason, the commissions requested that this training include a component on producing human-interest stories.

This template summarizes the best practices and other information that was presented in the workshop. In this context, the most effective human-interest stories are on a topic of general interest and either illustrate the positive outcomes of actions by the regulator or demonstrate how the ongoing work of the regulator benefits ordinary citizens. These outcomes or benefits are shown from the perspective of individuals they have affected. Regulatory work offers a wealth of opportunities for human interest stories. Some broad categories and examples follow.

Reducing your Energy Bill

1. Energy conservation and efficiency
   - Weatherization assistance programs
   - Education or incentive programs encouraging use of energy efficient lighting, appliances, etc.

2. Generating your own energy
   - Programs to encourage rooftop solar (feed-in tariffs, etc.)
   - Community renewable programs (purchasing shares in solar arrays, wind turbines, small hydro)

3. Programs to reduce the per-unit cost of energy
   - Energy choice
   - Time-of-day or time-of-use billing

Consumer Assistance and Protection

1. Complaint resolution
   - Billing disputes
   - Poor quality of service
   - Utilities violating terms of service

2. Assisting consumers in obtaining reliable utility service
   - Line extensions or upgrades in rural areas, for example

3. Assistance for vulnerable customers
   - Regulatory initiatives to assist vulnerable customers
   - Helping customers negotiate payment terms with providers
   - Directing customers to sources of assistance

Safety

1. Using regulatory power to remove safety hazards

2. Assisting customers harmed by safety violations

3. Safety education – protection during severe weather events or power outages

Regulatory Actions and Regulators

1. Assisting small independent generators in accessing the power grid

2. Ratemaking actions that benefit customers – for example, allowing rates to increase, but directing that the additional revenue be spent on reliability improvements

3. Important things that regulators do – examine key regulatory functions such grid control, energy market supervision, etc. by looking at them through the people who do those jobs. They key here is to profile the job, not the person; use the person to humanize the job by having them explain in their own words what they do every day.

4. "Above and beyond" stories – regulators who have done more than required to assist someone or solve a problem

6.1 Finding and Assembling a Story

1. Be alert for opportunities – agency employees, particularly those with outward-facing jobs such as consumer assistance, should be watchful for potential stories and make suggestions to communications staff.

2. Locate the people who will be at the center of the story and obtain their cooperation. It is always best to have participants fully identified in the story. However, if privacy or other concerns come into play, it is permissible to use pseudonyms if that is clearly disclosed. For example: Andrew M. (not his real name) or Andrew M. (real name withheld to protect privacy).

3. Steer clear of actual, potential, or perceived conflicts of interest. Unless the story is about an employee or the story otherwise necessitates, the people in the story should not have family, personal or business connections to the regulator. For example, assisting a consumer who is a cousin to an agency commissioner can appear as the agency doing someone a personal favor, even if that was not the case.

4. Stories should not appear to either endorse regulated entities or single them out for criticism. It is not always necessary to name the regulated entity.

6.2 Getting the Story into the News Media

1. Begin with a print-ready story in the form of a news release. Write it in the standard journalistic style, so that it can be used by print media (newspapers and online) with little or no editing.

2. Provide ancillary materials. The less the news media must do themselves, the more likely they are to use the story as presented to them. Ancillary materials include:
   - Photographs or illustrative charts and graphs – for example, a chart that compares energy usage before and after weatherization
   - Sound bites for radio – short audio clips that make key points related to the story – these should come from the people at the center of the story as much as possible
   - Video clips – these can be either short clips as above or a very brief version of the story that can be used by broadcast media or on media websites. It also should be posted to the agency website.

3. Note that producing ancillary materials does not require much equipment. Photos and both audio and video clips can be produced using smart phones and readily available editing software for a laptop computer. A moderately expensive digital camera will produce better quality photos and video at a reasonable cost.

4. The main story and ancillary material also can be distributed via agency social media platforms.

5. Follow up with the news media.
   - Contact key media when the story goes out and offer to provide additional information.
   - Help the news media contact subjects of the story.
   - Inquire why stories were used and – more importantly – why they were not. Use what you learned with the next story.
   - Track your successes. Monitor story placement. Assess whether it had any impact – for example, did a story about helping a customer resolve an issue prompt more call to your customer service office?

7 Concluding Thoughts

The above five templates summarize widely accepted current best practices in five key areas of stakeholder communications. They by no means address all aspects of dealing with consumers, regulated entities, non-governmental organizations, or other governmental bodies.

Furthermore, the best practices explored above are not static. They should be the subject of continuous adaptation and improvement to reflect changes in local contexts and needs. Changes in technology, particularly in social media and web-based tools, also require ongoing refinement of best practices.

Additionally, while the templates are general guidelines, keep in mind that the implementation must be tailored to the audience and its varying levels of expertise and sophistication. Describing grid operations presents entirely different challenges when speaking to the local television station as opposed to the specialized trade press. Similarly, it is much easier to explain the process of tariff adjustment to regulated entities than it is to retail consumers. In fact, the latter can pose a substantial challenge and could well be an appropriate subject for specialized training in the future.

Finally, it is important that these templates not simply reside in an electronic document in some obscure corner of a server or in a dusty binder on a shelf. They instead should be the used in training, in ongoing operations and as the subject of continuous scrutiny and refinement. NARUC encourages the three regulatory commissions to review and update this document periodically, along with the other resource documents, and to use these to support the training of new staff.

Annex 1

MEDIA INQUIRY RESPONSE

1. **Process Owner**: Spokesperson
2. **Purpose**: Establish a uniform protocol for responding to media inquiries and for reporting them to Commissioners, Secretary, and executive staff
3. **Scope**: All inquiries from the news media.
4. **Definitions**:

   News media: Newspapers and other publications, radio and television stations, blogs, and other Web-based outlets for the dissemination of information to specific audiences or the general public, or freelance reporters/writers working for such an entity.

   Media inquiry: A request for information, comment, or response from a representative of a news media organization. This can be in the form of a phone call, in-person contact, e-mail, or written inquiry.
5. **Relevant Document(s)**: None
6. **Content**:

   6.1. Any media inquiry received by a Commission employee other than Spokesperson should be immediately redirected to the Spokesperson or, in his/her absence, the designated substitute.

   6.2. Upon receipt of a media inquiry, the Spokesperson should make note of the nature of the inquiry and the identity of the person making the inquiry and the organization he/she represents.

   6.3. If the inquiry is of a routine or non-controversial nature, and the spokesperson has the information necessary to provide a complete response, she/he should respond to the inquiry at the time it is made.

   6.4. It is not allowed to respond to inquiries regarding substantive aspects of matters before the Commission or that are likely to come before the Commission. Matters such as the Commission process, scheduling and general background of a case may be addressed, but the merits of the case, the Commission's deliberations or the outcome may not be discussed.

   6.5. If the Spokesperson does not have the requested information, and the inquiry is of a routine and non-controversial nature, the Spokesperson should defer responding until the information can be obtained from Commission files or from the appropriate member of the Commission staff. The Spokesperson should determine whether there is a deadline by which the information is needed and respond by that deadline.

   6.6. Controversial or non-routine inquiries should be discussed with Commission executive staff (President, Commissioners, Head of Legal Department) prior to responding in order to determine the appropriate response. Reporters should be requested to submit questions in writing, with the Commission response provided in writing as well.

   6.7. Inquiries received via e-mail or other message should be responded to as soon as possible and are to be addressed by the close of business of the day on which they are received. If an answer cannot be provided by the close of day, receipt of the message should be acknowledged.

   6.8. Media inquiries are to be reported on immediately. The Spokesperson informs the FERK Secretary and Commissioners of media inquiries, including the organization making the inquiry, the nature of the inquiry and the response provided, if possible. Inquiries received after 3 p.m. are to be reported on the following business day.

7. Revision Summary

Revision	Revision Date	Section	Update Description
1			
2			
3			
4			

Annex 2

REQUEST TO INTERVIEW COMMISSIONERS OR STAFF

1. **Process Owners:** Commission Secretary and Commission spokesperson (if different person than secretary)
2. **Purpose:** Establish a protocol for responding to requests to interview Commissioners or Commission staff
3. **Scope:** All news media requests for interviews with Commissioners or Commission staff other than designated spokesperson. This process does not apply to simple media requests for information directed to the Commission spokesperson.
4. **Definitions:**

   News media: Print, electronic media for informing the general and expert public
5. **Relevant Documents:** None
6. **Content:**

   6.1. Any interview request received by Commission staff should be sent to the secretary or, on his/her absence, the designated substitute.

   6.2. The Commission spokesperson should contact the media outlet requesting the interview to determine the subject matter of the interview, be it a structured (with predefined questions) or a non-structured interview (with spontaneous questions).

   6.3. Where it is already known that the intended interview will focus on an ongoing Commission proceeding, the reporter, producer or a third person should be informed about the restrictions prescribed by the regulatory rules and regulations concerning the disclosure of information about ongoing proceedings and the reasons for such restrictions.

   6.4. After obtaining the necessary information, the Secretary shall inform Commission members about the request, the person requested to be interviewed (chairman, Commission member or SERC staff member), the type and title of the media outlet that will broadcast the interview, the person who submitted the request, as well as information about the reporter who will be conducting the interview.

   6.5. Commission members, in consultation with the secretary and spokesperson, shall decide whether to grant the request for an interview. Where a request to interview a Commission staff member has been made, such a request shall first be discussed with the staff member. It shall then be considered by the Commission members before a decision is reached in consultation with the secretary.

   6.6. Where a request to interview a Commission member has been approved, the secretary and staff members shall provide all the necessary assistance to the Commission member in preparing for the interview. The same procedure shall be applied when a request to interview a staff member has been approved. Depending on the subject matter of the interview, cooperation with the competent sectors in Commission should be established and the preparation of relevant information concerning the subject matter of the interview, as well as responses to basic questions

(who, what, when, where, why, how) should be requested. Try to predict possible questions and prepare responses to these questions, as well as "sensitive and uncomfortable" questions that could be asked.

6.7. When the person requested to be interviewed is unable to give it, offer the possibility to interview a different member of the Commission or staff.

6.8. Where no one is able to do the interview, inform the producer, reporter or a third person who requested the interview thereof and provide an explanation.

6.9. Depending on the subject matter of the interview, cooperation with the competent sectors in Commission should be established and the preparation of relevant information concerning the subject matter of the interview, as well as responses to basic questions (who, what, when, where, why, how) should be requested. Try to predict possible questions and prepare responses to these questions, as well as "sensitive and uncomfortable" questions that could be asked.

6.10. Depending on the preferences of the person to be interviewed, prepare texts or talking points on the subject matter of the interview or certain issues.

6.11. After the end of the program or the recording of the interview, express gratitude on behalf of Commission in writing (by e-mail) for the invitation and the opportunity to share certain information with the public.

7. Revision Summary

Revision	Revision Date	Section	Update Description
1			
2			
3			
4			

Annex 3

Sample Human-Interest Story

Local Resident Finds Multiple Benefits in Their New Rooftop Solar System

In its first month of operation, Andrew Miller's rooftop solar system generated 50 percent more electricity than he bought from his utility company and cut his electric bill by about 90 percent.

But that's only half the story, as far as Miller is concerned.

"I like the financial benefits, but they come in the long term," he said, noting that it will take years for his system to pay for itself. "The immediate return for me is that I reduced my carbon footprint by about a metric ton in the first month."

Miller's system operates under a protocol known as "net metering." His house in Louisville, Kentucky, remains connected to the utility's grid through a meter that flows in two directions.

When he uses more power than the solar panels produce – notably at night – the meter runs forward, recording his consumption from the grid. When the solar panels generate more utility than Miller's house is consuming, the meter runs in the opposite direction.

If, at the end of a billing period, the solar panels have produced more power than Miller has consumed, he receives a credit for the excess kilowatt-hours (kwh). The credits carry over from month to month and accumulate, declining only when electric consumption exceeds solar power production.

For a billing period that ends in a credit, Miller pays only the monthly service charge and a few small fees, leaving him with a bill of about $15. That is a small fraction of his average pre-solar monthly bill of about $138 for his all-electric house.

"I expect to pay no more than the minimum bill for at least eight months of the year," Miller said. "Since we have electric heat, I don't think that I can offset my consumption with solar power during the winter months, when generation will be lower, and usage will be higher. A lot depends on how many credits I have built up by that time."

The first billing cycle with solar power was promising. Miller's house consumed 600 kwh from his utility (a kwh is the amount of electricity used by a 10-watt LED light bulb in 100 hours) and sent 935 kwh of excess solar power back to the grid, ending with a credit of 335 kwh at the start of the next billing period.

Miller said he had been considering a solar power system for several years. He was prompted to act by changes to Kentucky's net metering rules that could lead to rates that are less favorable for owners of rooftop solar systems.

"We were going to go solar at some point," he said. "But we wanted to lock in the one-to-one credits, because that's really the most equitable way to treat customers with rooftop solar and to encourage people to install solar systems."

While he declined to provide the precise cost of his 9.6-kilowatt system, Miller said it was somewhat higher than the national average of $2,800 per kilowatt of capacity. The net cost will be reduced by a 26 percent federal tax credit.

"It was a considerable investment, but it was the right thing to do," Miller said.

Would Miller encourage others to consider rooftop solar systems?

"Absolutely," he says. "If your house has enough unshaded roof space with the proper orientation to get enough sun, then it absolutely makes sense, both financially and environmentally."

Miller acknowledges that it will take many more rooftop solar systems to make a meaningful reduction in carbon emissions. But he believes that more people are recognizing the value of doing so.

"I had several neighbors ask about our system while it was being installed," he said. "And one of them just had solar panels put on his roof."

And Miller himself is not done reducing his carbon footprint. The next step?

"Our next car is going to be a plug-in hybrid," he said. "Then I can start using the sun to power my transportation."

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